

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 38

Mission Statement for Phenomenology Roundtable

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The Phenomenology Roundtable

Abstract

The Mission Statement of the Phenomenology Roundtable was written as a group project in collaboration with all of the current members of the Roundtable. The Mission Statement emphasizes the necessity for a new departure in the human sciences. This new departure is constituted through the adoption of the perspective of transcendental phenomenology and is inspired by, but not limited to, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The standpoint of transcendental phenomenology is understood to imply 1) that positivism is refuted; 2) that the existential and hermeneutic paths developed by later phenomenologists are already implicit in Husserlian phenomenology; 3) that the notion of an "applied" phenomenology is contradictory and that phenomenology is always already concerned with the lifeworld and can meaningfully and radically address lifeworldly issues such as racism, colonialism, sexism, etc., without further ado; and 4) that a collaborative and dialogic stance that facilitates interdisciplinary and intersubjective communication is essential to the continuance of the phenomenological project

Phenomenology, in its Husserlian inspiration, is an attempt to constitute a scientifically valid methodology for the human sciences through a radical inquiry into the basis of the meaningfulness of human existence. Phenomenology discovers these roots in the world constituting subject. As such, phenomenology is historically the most sustained and most successful challenge to positivism, the naïve belief in the reality and knowability of an independently

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existing world. The world today, academia as well as in society at large, is garbed in various forms of positivism, from the logicism of analytic philosophy to the historicism of the social sciences and humanities to the naturalism of the hard sciences. The positivist search for "objective knowledge" has lost touch with its own origins in the human, and in so doing has become profoundly inhumane. In its emphasis on transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity, i.e., the human, as the starting point of all philosophical investigation, the Phenomenology Roundtable stands as an intervention in this positivist landscape.

From its very inception, in its Socratic moment, philosophy aimed at uncovering and overcoming prejudice. Husserl's discovery that the subject can perform a voluntary act of suspending all beliefs, what he called the "reduction," is the foundation for doing so in that performing the reduction reveals the world as constituted in intentional acts of the subject, of consciousness. This stands in contrast to positivism's search for so-called objectivity. In failing to locate the subject as constituting the world itself, positivism fails to recognize and ground itself in its transcendental starting point; consequently, it remains at the level of sedimented, relativistic knowledge and thus cannot be radical, i.e., cannot adequately uncover the roots of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Through the reduction, phenomenology grounds itself in a legitimate transcendental starting point and is thereby genuinely directed toward freedom. The reduction opens up a space for subjects, through infinite self-investigation, to reconstitute themselves and the world free from prejudice, thereby properly grounding the quest for knowledge, and, in so doing, moving us toward liberation.

Starting from the subject entails recognition not only that all knowledge of the world is achieved by intentional consciousness, but also that the world itself is the achievement of the transcendental ego. Given this, transcendental phenomenology encompasses both the hermeneutic and existential dimensions of human existence. Husserl's phenomenology thus already presupposes many of the insights of his students. This is not to say that all knowledge is to be found in Husserl's writings alone. Rather, we recognize Husserlian phenomenology as our ground and as the proper method of philosophical analysis and work from this perspective in dialogue with other phenomenological perspectives.

As an investigation into the lifeworld, phenomenology stands in opposition to the concept of "applied philosophy." The very idea that philosophy can be applied suggests that it can also remain unapplied. From a phenomenological perspective, the world is constituted in and through

subjectivity and its history; moreover, it can be reconstituted. In this, philosophy as phenomenology is always already involved in the world in the explication of the transcendental possibilities of what it is to be a constituting subject in the world.

The members of the Roundtable work on projects in areas such as critical race theory, gender and queer theory, psychoanalysis, media studies, political and social theory, communications theory, and subaltern studies. From a phenomenological perspective, these areas represent regional ontologies, each with its own issues and its own place in the academic and activist worlds. Working in diverse disciplines and on myriad projects, we recognize their situatedness and thereby seek to embrace an interdisciplinary dialogue that takes seriously the richness and complexity of human existence. Indeed, we believe that it is only in and through the perspective of transcendental phenomenology that such differences can be recognized in their integrity and for their unique contributions to the project of reconstituting the lifeworld free from positivist prejudice and dehumanization. Thus, we do not view ours as separate and unrelated projects, but, rather, see them as inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

The Phenomenology Roundtable was founded at a meeting of Radical Philosophy Association in November 2000, at Loyola University, Chicago. There, over coffee, several of us gathered and discussed the lack of a space for doing phenomenology.¹ We experienced the antagonistic and confrontational attitude of the dominant philosophical organizations; we bemoaned the lack of collegiality and constructiveness in their meetings; and, most significantly, we noted the lack of a Husserlian starting point in most of the work of these groups. We decided we would form our own group aimed at a creative and supportive atmosphere in which we and other phenomenologists could discuss our work and interact with one another. In our meetings, we combine the most radical critique with the respect and support indicative of a true intersubjective community--two ideals that, we believe, entail one another; we remain committed to collaborative and highly engaged discussion; and we welcome and encourage participation by all those doing phenomenology, students and professors, academics and activists alike. In all of this, we recognize the importance of our work as part of the

¹ Carolyn Cusick, David Fryer, Erik Garrett, Lewis Gordon, Michael Michau, Michael Monahan, and Marilyn Nissim-Sabat. The Phenomenology Roundtable would like to give recognition to the work of Lewis R. Gordon as one of its most important sources of inspiration. In his work, Gordon, a founding member and enthusiastic supporter of the Roundtable, has constituted, for the first time, a phenomenological critical race theory, which stands as a model for the kind of committed phenomenological liberatory theory that the Roundtable seeks to create.

shared goal of human knowledge and liberation, which is, after all, the goal of phenomenology itself. We hope in this way to make a contribution to the continuing role of philosophy as essential to the future of human life.